

The Concept of Rigor

By Naperville School District 203 Superintendent Mark Mitrovich

The mission of the Naperville Community Unit School District 203 is to produce students who are self-directed learners, community contributors, collaborative workers, complex thinkers, and quality producers. Our goal in helping students achieve our mission is that these characteristics are measured in terms of significance in contributing to the greater well being of our society and not just our conventional measures of success. To achieve these characteristics requires a concentration on the four “Rs” of education: rigor, relevance, responsibility, and resiliency. In this article, we’ll focus on the concept of rigor.

Today’s curriculum, as presented in our schools, becomes more rigorous each year. As rapidly as our society is changing, and with technological advances occurring almost daily, we must strive to prepare our students for the demands of their future, not our past. To be literate was once confined to reading and writing skills. To be literate in today’s society involves multiple literacies including mathematical, technological, scientific, and more. The development of educational standards at the state and national level has contributed to some degree, but it is the on-going effort of individual teachers, building administrators, and district curriculum leaders working within our curriculum development process that is making the real difference.

As reported to our Board of Education in October, students in District 203 score very high on all measures of academic progress. Our most current results show that in excess of 97% of our students meet or exceed the state’s educational standards. However, success in the traditional content areas is not enough. The increasing rigor of our curricular and instructional programs is evidence of the focus on higher order thinking skills. Beyond memorization and application of factual knowledge are the critical skills of analyzing a problem or challenge, synthesizing various solutions to that problem or challenge, and then evaluating the best solution and its effectiveness. The rigor in this approach to learning requires that our students develop an answer based on the application of prior knowledge and experience while determining new solutions to challenging, real world problems. As one of my son’s high school teachers once told him – “No one pays you for answering the questions at the end of the chapter.”

The rigor experienced by our students is also a direct result of the professional rigor our staff exhibits in the standards of performance to which they hold themselves. Countless hours are devoted to professional development so that our teacher leaders can reflect, in both their lessons and their instructional skill, the rigor necessary to provide the highest level of educational experience for our students.

While the test scores are one measure of success, it is what our students are doing within our classes and once they leave our educational system that will provide the measure of significance for them as learners and for us as educators. Holding ourselves and our students to ever more rigorous standards of performance will ensure the long-term success of not only our students, but our society.